

## The inexplicable disappearances

*A thorough inquiry necessary to reveal the truth*

INCIDENTS of citizens disappearing mysteriously are beginning to cause legitimate concern in the country. Tushar Islam Titu went missing in July 2008 after he was accosted by four men and bundled into a vehicle. In June this year, Dhaka City Corporation ward councillor and BNP politician Chowdhury Alam vanished into thin air after he was kidnapped by some men, quite possibly the same group which had on an earlier occasion tried to abduct him. These two disappearances very justifiably raise the question of who abducted them and where they happen to be at present, assuming of course that they are still alive. Our worries take a much more serious dimension, however, through Ain-o-Salish Kendra informing us that as many as 22 individuals have disappeared since January this year. ASK has reason to believe, though, that the figure could be much higher. Add to the matter of the disappearances the allegations which have lately been levelled at the security agencies, particularly the Rapid Action Battalion. For its part, RAB has vehemently denied its complicity or involvement in the disappearances.

The question now arises as to who or which organization is responsible for these acts of manifestly illegal and disturbing behaviour. The question assumes greater importance because of the fact that there is at the moment a democratically elected government in the country; and by definition such a government is in the ultimate sense a guarantor of the law and individual liberty because of the transparency in governance it is constitutionally expected to uphold. If, however, citizens have disappeared at the hands of state agencies, it is an ominous sign of how not only the security of individuals will be placed at risk but also of how the government itself may be undermined from within. In a very large number of instances, cases have been filed and investigations launched to look into the disappearances as well as the death of people from 'crossfire', 'encounters' and the like. The grim reality, however, is that none of these investigations has led to any definitive conclusion because of the alleged reluctance of the authorities to pursue the cases to the full. Any investigation launched by the authorities turns out to be so feeble and lopsided and so much at variance with the reality that a number of rights organizations have simply declined to be part of any inquiries on the disappearances as well as death in 'crossfire'. The chairman of the National Human Rights Commission, Prof. Mizanur Rahman, perhaps speaks for all of us when he states that the manner and nature in which investigations are conducted is wrong and flawed.

We believe that a thorough inquiry into the disappearances, taking into account the identities of those involved in them, has become an imperative. The security agencies, be they the police or RAB or any other organisation, cannot simply operate in denial mode and inform the country that they have no idea about the disappearances. On a larger basis, if the government is not to see its democratic credentials take a nosedive, it is imperative that a serious and substantive investigation be launched into each and every instance of disappearance through the setting up of a judicial inquiry that must include personalities from rights organizations and go the whole length into unearthing the mystery behind the disappearances. A democratic Bangladesh ought not to become, even remotely, a throwback to those authoritarian regimes which made citizens disappear in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. Let the Jatiyo Sangsad initiate a purposeful discussion on the issue. It is a matter of grave public interest and can be ignored only at peril to political pluralism.

## Gold and silver in cricket

*A saving grace for Bangladesh in the Asian Games*

OUR persistence with cricket at all levels is paying dividends. On the back of the national team's inspiring series victory over New Zealand, our second string side has won a gold medal in the Guangzhou Asian Games. And, of the three medals won by Bangladeshi participants in altogether 18 disciplines, two came from cricket itself. Apart from the gold in the men segment, our women cricketers came out runner-up bagging a silver among the women cricket teams.

Congratulations to our Asian gold winners in cricket. Having vanquished a strong side in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh won the finals against an upcoming and dour Afghan team from a war-torn country. The five-wicket Bangladesh victory over Afghanistan was scripted by teamwork as all triumphs are in the end, but contributions that made the difference came from batters Shabbir Rahman and Naeem Islam.

Though India did not enter a team, the competition nonetheless was rather broad based with nine teams participating. It may have been anything but world standard, still emerging at the top of the table took considerable grit and skill. We think, it is yet another step towards acquiring consistency of performance and falling into a winning groove which have so long deluded us.

Our under-nineteens have been testing their skills with fiercely competitive sides and doing reasonably well with signs of talent flashed across. So, altogether we are emerging from a merely cricket-loving nation to a cricketering one whose full potential will only be realised depending on our success in taking things forward from here.

There must be many more first class cricket competitions at the domestic level on a regular basis -- at the inter-school, inter-college, inter-university levels aside from those on the inter-district format. There is no shortcut to breeding talent and grooming cricketers of class except through organising more competitions and giving more exposure to our cricketering side overseas. The way forward is through better administration, organisation, improved facilities and acquisition of techniques for all-round skill development.

## Repackaging Bangladesh

We must start doing things that are expected from a responsible and democratic country. Next, we must identify our national strengths and weaknesses. We must highlight our core national values and build up a branding profile. This will be the start of the repackaging of Bangladesh for the world.

ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

LOVELY Planet, one of the world's leading travel guidebooks, owned by BBC worldwide, has ranked Bangladesh as the Best Value Destination in the world for 2011. It names nine other countries/cities to complete the list of top ten. Behind Bangladesh stand Nicaragua, Washington D.C., Paris, Philippines, Argentina, Naples, Ukraine and Syria.

Each of these destinations boasts of some unique cost saving feature. But the Lonely Planet says that an international visitor will be rewarded most and get the maximum "value for his money" if he visits Bangladesh.

Does all this sound gimmicky? Not so, if one sees what attractions Bangladesh offers. Lonely Planet says in unequivocal terms that in that country you can get marvelous meals for under \$1. A midrange hotel room for 10 times less than what is available in a similar category elsewhere. "You will pay a little more to get around the Sundarbans National Park on a tiger spotting tour -- \$150 or thereabouts -- but it is still peanuts, even compared to what you pay next door in India." Critics, however, point out that such a list only refers to "cheap destinations."

Lonely Planet says that this ranking is based on the feedback it has received from travelers "getting their money's worth." And they have, besides their staff and authors, a 600,000 strong online community to present to their readers the best places to go and things to do around the world. Next year (2011), we may, therefore, expect a large number of tourists to avail of the value for money deals in Bangladesh. It will give a boost to our touristic image.

To many of us this ranking sounds incredible. But Bangladesh seems to be slowly and imperceptibly becoming the "new kid in the block."

Some people say that something immense is happening in Bangladesh. Positive developments in many sectors are taking place in the country. They say, look at the surge of RMG export orders. See the line of local and foreign banks lining up our main streets in Dhaka and elsewhere. Check the large number of high-rises changing the skyline of our cities. Feel the jamming of our streets with mid-size and big cars.

Bangladesh is one of the few countries

in the world that was not affected by the recent global recession. Today, Bangladesh boasts of shipbuilding capability and is looking forward to becoming a regional communication hub. Foreign remittances increased during the global downturn just as exports grew and imports bloated. Human development is also noteworthy.

Sceptics argue that because Bangladesh's economy had little exposure to the outside world, it was not affected by the slump. The country produces and exports basic RMG products, which come cheap. The countries affected by recession switched to Bangladesh as a source of supply as most of them could not afford high-end textiles and garments.

While acknowledging that there is some truth in what the sceptics say, the point is that Bangladesh has moved up the value chain too and has made healthy structural changes in production and marketing. But let it also be clear that individual entrepreneurs also took grave risks and created opportunities for themselves. Today, they are reaping some of the benefits that accompanied the risks. Their success can also be seen in other sectors like leather, pharmaceuticals and jute manufacturing. Agriculture is, of course, already a success in many ways.

The dilemma before all of us is that Bangladesh could have attained this level of success earlier if the country had not suffered from an image problem. Even with present successes, the entrepreneurs are not confident that they will not stumble again on this count.

The western media has largely been responsible for creating and hyping much of our negative image. We also had a certain category of leaders in the past who, for the sake of foreign aid, were reluctant to highlight any positive news lest it would lessen their chance of getting this aid. Thus, the country was in an image trap that restricted foreign investments, tourism and foreign talent.

However things are likely to change. One important reason is that certain prestigious international investment banks and credit rating agencies have, after evaluation of our economy, given Bangladesh enviable ratings. Thus, Standard and Poor, Moody's Investors, Goldman Sachs, J.P. Morgan and Price Waterhouse Coopers have given good citations. It seems that, at long last,



**An opportunity to showcase Bangladesh.**

Bangladesh is being noticed by the international community. In keeping with this changing image we need to change into new clothes.

So what do we do? At the outset, we must find ways to reduce our negative image. We must start doing things that are expected from a responsible and democratic country. Next, we must identify our national strengths and weaknesses. We must highlight our core national values and build up a branding profile. This will be the start of the repackaging of Bangladesh for the world.

We must find out what other countries Bangladesh is usually compared to, in the region and in the world at large, and what type of packaging these countries use in order to attract favourable attention. We should bring forth our core values, and associate Bangladesh with those values that investors like or respect. These value assets can make our country more attractive and compelling than our competitors. This will get Bangladesh differentiated and promoted.

Bangladesh has to be identified in the mind of visitors and investors through a cluster of images of the country, like:

- Sounds (our music);
- Colour (our flowers and dress);
- Words (our songs);
- Shapes;
- Smells (our cuisine)
- Other symbols (our values-- resilience, adaptability).

These will persuade a foreigner to come, stay and interact closely for investment or tourism. The clarity and strength of these chosen images of a country in a foreigner's mind will gradually overtake the negative images of Bangladesh that persist in him.

During 2011, Bangladesh will be hosting a great sports extravaganza, the Cricket World Cup. Our government has big plans to boost tourism on that occasion. Major multi-national companies are also likely to come next year to Bangladesh to see if they can invest, especially in textiles and RMG. They will come only if they get favourable reports about Bangladesh in 2010 from their peers and partners already operating in Bangladesh. Their report will prompt the newcomers to take positive decision.

Bangladesh has most of the economic fundamentals. Investors and tourists should normally flock to a country like ours. But they desist because, among other things, we have not been able to get rid of our bad image. Furthermore, we have not yet been able to create a new brand image. We must invent a new slogan for Bangladesh, just as Lonely Planet has given us one of its own.

Time is running out. The tourists are at our gates. The investors are packing their bags.

Ashfaqur Rahman is a former Ambassador and Chairman of the Centre for Foreign Affairs.

## The great escape

The catalysts of change are multiple and multifaceted and the government needs to be creative and open in order to ensure that economic drivers support pro-poor growth, so that those below the bottom of the ladder can discover an escape route out of poverty.

SANJAN HAQUE

THE poorest 10% of the population lack the human and social assets to escape poverty. The drivers of growth have by-passed such groups over an extended period of time and households that remain in poverty today, suffered from poverty 20 years ago. A multitude of multilateral, bilateral, GOs and NGOs will praise the successes of Bangladesh, to reduce income poverty from its zenith of 74% in 1973-74 to less than 40% in 2005. This is, to all intents and purposes, a significant achievement and one which should be lauded. Not for the efforts of any one institution, or the placebo of policy prescription by global institutions, but as an evolving understanding on what will lift people from poverty.

The poverty faced by Bangladeshis today involves two types of disadvantages -- "social" and "spatial." The social reflects the face of specific groups of chronic poor embedded across class, caste, ethnicity and religion. The spatial highlights the inability of households in geographical areas with reduced capabilities to access economic growth centres, or benefit from the drivers of change. These households remain mired in the monotony of a single livelihood, and are often dependent on climatic benevolence or the philanthropy of chance for daily survival.

Over the past four decades, land holdings have gradually become smaller, and between two agricultural censuses of 1983-84 and 1995-96 the total availability of agricultural land has declined by about one million hectares. Conversely, productivity by output has improved. This

has not directly impacted on a reduction of income poverty. Studies have repeatedly revealed the inability of farm-based activities to solely impact on a long-term sustainable reduction of poverty as well as ensure national food security.

In a new publication, "Global poverty and the new bottom billion: Three-quarters of the world's poor live in middle-income countries," the Institute of Development Studies in the UK reveals that the majority of the world's poor live in Middle Income Countries (MIC). While this finding may not be revelatory it reflects the aspirations of once poor countries to race towards industrialisation, creating immense wealth disparities and social inequalities. The government has set the milestone of 2021 for Bangladesh to join this club. Can Bangladesh do it differently?

The expansion of cities remains a global trend, with an expected growth of more than 50% of the populations of least developed countries living in cities by 2045; urbanisation, and more pertinently, industrialisation, remains the locus of the argument for a re-orientation of the understanding of poverty reduction.

The imagery of a lush green-golden field encapsulated by *amar shonar bangla* (my golden Bengal) used in the process of nation-building in the early years of independence, reflected an era of socialisation where independence, freedom and progress were seen through the lens of self-sufficiency, emancipation and nationalism. This was a bold era of centralised planning and idealism! Does this real sense of agrarian nationalism correspond with virtual world of "Digital Bangladesh"?

In an interconnected world (hastened

by the internet superhighway) where the demographic explosion (across Asia) has created a pyramid of expectations added with changes in human, physical, financial and natural assets of the poor, Bangladesh lies at the doorsteps of change. The MDGs sharpened the focus for poverty reduction practitioners and galvanised protagonists in the theatre of change, however, least developed countries are not satisfied with merely playing the bit part; they want the lead.

Escaping poverty remains elusive for 30 million Bangladeshis constituting the bottom 20% of the population in 2005. Binayak Sen, in his 2003 article, "Drivers of Escape and Descent: Changing Household Fortunes in Rural Bangladesh," identified human capital as a key source of income growth and an important trigger for economic and social well-being.

Human capital has the strength to facilitate movement from lower-wage agricultural activities to higher wage non-agricultural activities where skill requirements are higher. Sen also argues that the accumulation of non-agricultural assets has played an important role for households that successfully escaped poverty.

Households suffering from chronic poverty do so, centrally, as a result of a lack of access to resources. This includes both cultivable land as well as value-added skills towards non-farm activities. Sen's study also revealed that the proportion of the workforce engaged in non-agricultural activities has increased from 38% in 1987-88 to 56% in 2000 for households escaping poverty, households suffering from continuous poverty, 23% to 38%, and households descending further into poverty lay at 26% to 35%.

The trend amongst all three groups highlights that escape from poverty is dependent on occupational diversification, especially the capacity to switch from lower-productivity agricultural activities to higher productivity non-agricultural activities.

The government has placed important emphasis on digitalising Bangladesh as well as instituting "ekti bari ekta khamar"

in the future five-year plan (replacing the PRSP). One needs to decipher the policy narrative from the political rhetoric. Digitalising places Bangladesh at the foothills of the global charge towards improved cyber connectivity, a trend first started in South Asia by Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi when he modernised the telephony network.

Gandhi's plan ensured that India was able to capitalise on major corporations transferring call-centres in the '90s and also creating the space for success stories such as Infosys. Similar plans are already underway in Bangladesh. Upgrading telephony services and cyber connectivity bode well for inward investment but also reflect the undercurrent of modernisation or more pertinently, industrialisation.

The growth of intra-country and inter-country migration clearly identifies the need to re-orient government policy on creating job opportunities in the secondary and tertiary sectors. The growth of major conurbations and industrial centres, combined with a burgeoning population, highlights the need to depart from an exclusive farm-centred rural development policy to one which focuses on an industry oriented urbanising master plan.

Donors and the government will do well to learn from countries within the region on the route to building the industrial superstructure, cementing the cracks within the governance framework and creating an educated work-force in order to ensure double digit economic growth. However, the merits of such efforts will be judged not by the skyscrapers which adorn cities such as Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Mumbai or Shanghai, but on their ability to insure the very poorest benefit from such drivers.

The catalysts of change are multiple and multifaceted and the government needs to be creative and open in order to ensure that economic drivers support pro-poor growth, so that those below the bottom of the ladder can discover an escape route out of poverty.

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